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Work on the review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, which was prepared in accordance with Economic and Social Council decision 2017/228 and past practices, provides information about the work carried out by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, in cooperation with other entities of the United Nations system, in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It describes the preparation of the annual report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (E/2017/66), as mandated by the General Assembly (see resolution 70/1, para. 83). Also described is the work undertaken to update the database on the global indicators, including the data and metadata repository, and support countries in the implementation of the indicators at the national level. In addition, the present report informs the Statistical Commission about the conference on national reporting platforms, the research exercise on the piloting of a federated system of national and global data hubs and the establishment of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training. The Commission is invited to take note of the work carried out by the Statistics Division in cooperation with the United Nations system and to comment and agree upon the way forward in relation to the results of the conference, the research exercise and the establishment of the network and its proposed work programme.

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I. Introduction

1. In order to promote accountability to their citizens, Member States committed to providing a systematic follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national, regional and global levels. The high-level political forum on sustainable development was mandated to play a central role in overseeing the follow-up and review processes at the global level. Member States agreed that the follow-up and review at the high-level political forum would be informed by an annual progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals to be prepared by the Secretary-General, in cooperation with the United Nations system, based on the global indicator framework and the data produced by national statistical systems and information collected at the regional level (see General Assembly resolution 70/1, para. 83). Furthermore, Member States requested the Secretary-General to continue to maintain the Sustainable Development Goals global indicator database to inform the yearly progress report on the Goals and to ensure transparency on the data, statistics and metadata presented on countries and used for the regional and global aggregates, and urged countries, the United Nations funds and programmes, the specialized agencies, the Secretariat, including the regional commissions, the Bretton Woods institutions, international organizations and bilateral and regional funding agencies to intensify their support for strengthening data collection and statistical capacity-building, including capacity-building that strengthens coordination among national statistical offices, as appropriate and within their mandates, in a coordinated manner that recognizes national priorities and reflects national ownership of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (see General Assembly resolution 71/313, paras. 4 and 11).

II. Second progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals

2. In the annual report of the Secretary-General on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (E/2017/66), the high-level political forum on sustainable development was informed about the global progress made in delivering on the Goals and targets in the second year of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The report is based on the global indicator framework that was developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 71/313. A supplementary statistical annex containing detailed global and regional aggregates of the indicators was released to accompany the progress report.[1]

3. In addition, the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017*[2] was launched by the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs on 17 July 2017. It includes data and analysis on the Sustainable Development Goals intended for a wider audience in a user-friendly format with charts and infographics on selected indicators for which data are available.

4. The reports show that, while considerable progress has been made over the past decade across all areas of development, the pace of progress observed in previous years is insufficient to fully meet the Sustainable Development Goals and targets by 2030. Time is therefore of the essence. Moreover, progress has not always been equitable. Advancements have been uneven across regions, between the sexes, and among people of different ages, wealth and locales, including urban and rural

[1] The report and statistical annex are available from https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/.

[2] Available from http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2017/.

dwellers. Faster and more inclusive progress is needed to accomplish the bold vision articulated in the 2030 Agenda.

5. The reports provide an overview of global progress towards the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda, on the basis of the indicators for which data are available. Some targets are not reflected, either because of a lack of data or because they are measured by indicators that are still undergoing methodological development. For most indicators, values represent global, regional and subregional aggregates. They are calculated from data compiled by international agencies from national statistical systems on the basis of their respective mandates and specialized expertise. National data are often adjusted for international comparability and, where lacking, are estimated by international agencies. The reports are prepared by the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, with input from the entire United Nations system, including international and regional agencies that contributed data and analysis based on their mandates and expertise.

6. The two annual reports provide important information to Member States for their deliberations at the high-level political forum on sustainable development and inform the media and the public about the progress made towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The reports are well received by policymakers and the general public.

III. Sustainable Development Goal indicators website

7. The *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017* was complemented by the release of the Sustainable Development Goals indicators database,[3] which provides transparency on the data used for global reporting. The database contains data on the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators used in the two above-mentioned reports and includes country-level data as well as regional and global aggregates. The database, maintained by the Statistics Division, includes data for 132 of the 232 global indicators and a total of 460,000 data records. The data series comprise Sustainable Development Goal indicators series and additional data series under many of the indicators.[4] Efforts are currently under way to upgrade the database user interface to enable the data to be accessed in a more interactive and convenient way. In addition, the recently launched global Sustainable Development Goal indicators application programming interface provides programmatic access to the global indicators database using the OpenAPI specification.[5]

8. The data and accompanying metadata have been provided by international agencies and entities according to their respective mandates. The metadata repository[6] contains metadata for the indicators that are currently included in the database. The metadata follow a template discussed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and provide information on the data source and compilation process followed by the international agencies. Often, national data were adjusted for international comparability or, where data were missing, they were estimated. Data estimated at the national level and used for the calculation of global and regional aggregates are not always made available. For each indicator value, the

[3] Available from http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/.

[4] The data series identified by the symbol "SD" correspond to the global indicator framework that was adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 71/313. Additional series are identified by the symbol "+".

[5] The Sustainable Development Goal indicators application programming interface documentation is available from https://unstats.un.org/SDGAPI/swagger/.

[6] Available from http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/.

responsible international agency is requested to indicate whether the national data were adjusted, estimated, modelled or are the result of global monitoring.[7]

9. The metadata and their presentation will be further improved in consultation with countries and regional and international agencies. The efforts to develop comprehensive metadata on the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators are complemented by the development of an e-handbook on the indicators to provide compilation guidance to countries. Similarly, efforts will continue to ensure and improve the presentation and quality of the data, including through the establishment of an upgraded data processing and dissemination system.

10. The Sustainable Development Goal indicators website, maintained by the Statistics Division, presents all information related to the development and implementation of the indicator framework. It provides access to the related reports, the global indicators database and the metadata repository. It also contains information on the work and activities of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

IV. Development cooperation and technical assistance activities of the Statistics Division on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators

11. The Statistics Division, the regional commissions, the specialized agencies and the funds and programmes of the United Nations system have always worked closely together in the area of statistical development. Currently, a $10-million United Nations Development Account programme, with the participation of all regional commissions, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme and the Statistics Division, is being implemented to strengthen national statistical systems for the follow-up and review of the Sustainable Development Goals and to address specific data gaps. The programme is structured according to four pillars: means of implementation, environment statistics and indicators, social and demographic statistics and indicators, and economic statistics and indicators. The implementation began gradually during the fourth quarter of 2016. Most activities under the four pillars were initially carried out at the regional and subregional levels and then progressively focused on country missions, national training workshops, the development of guidelines, the collection of good practices and the development of online training courses. By mid-2019, the programme is expected to conclude with a series of subregional and regional workshops.

[7] The nature or type of the data in the indicators database is determined as follows: country data are produced and disseminated by the country (including data adjusted by the country to meet international standards); country data adjusted are produced and provided by the country, but adjusted by the international agency for international comparability to comply with internationally agreed standards, definitions and classifications; estimated data are estimated based on national data, such as surveys or administrative records, or other sources, but on the same variable being estimated, and produced by the international agency when country data for some year(s) are not available, when multiple sources exist or when there are data quality issues; modelled data are modelled by the agency on the basis of other covariates when there is a complete lack of data on the variable being estimated; global monitoring data are produced on a regular basis by the designated agency for global monitoring, based on country data, and there is no corresponding figure at the country level.

12. The Statistics Division is currently concluding two more United Nations Development Account projects, which are aimed at enhancing the statistical capacity of Member States for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals. One project provides assistance to national statistical offices in six pilot countries to measure, monitor, assess and report on progress on achieving the 2030 Agenda. One of its main outputs has been an assessment of the statistical capacity of the pilot countries to monitor the global Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The other project supports Member States' efforts to develop and strengthen environment statistics and integrated environmental-economic accounting for improved monitoring of sustainable development.

13. In December 2016, the Statistics Division formally agreed to conduct a project with the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to make the Sustainable Development Goal indicators available to the broadest possible audience and to strengthen the capacity of countries in the compilation and use of the indicators. The project, which is funded by the Department for International Development and implemented by the Statistics Division, has a total budget of 6.6 million pounds sterling and covers 20 countries across Africa and Asia, nine of which participated in a previous project of the Statistics Division and the Department for International Development on the Millennium Development Goal indicators.[8] It will run until the end of June 2021.

14. The main project activities are the research and analysis of country capacities, the development of national strategies for monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, the creation or upgrade of national repositories of Sustainable Development Goal indicators, the development of a Sustainable Development Goal data and visualization platform and a country data lab, and the establishment of an automated data exchange based on the statistical data and metadata exchange standard. The Statistics Division has completed the inception phase of the project and is now moving towards its full implementation, which will involve assessment missions to countries that did not participate in the previous project.

15. In the context of the implementation of the project, and in order to provide a space for discussing specific country needs for reporting platforms and review possible solutions, the Statistics Division is organizing a conference on national platforms for reporting on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators, to be held from 22 to 24 January 2018 in New York. The urgency of establishing such platforms in both developing and developed countries has been underlined in discussions in several forums. The conference will review best practices, discuss and showcase possible solutions and identify ways forward for their implementation. Recommendations and guidelines for the basic requisites of national data platforms for follow-up and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals will be provided in a background document to the Commission.

16. The Statistics Division works closely with other international agencies within the United Nations Development Group to provide assistance to countries on implementing the Sustainable Development Goal indicators and strengthening statistical capacities for the 2030 Agenda. The Statistics Division also co-chaired, with the United Nations Development Programme, a task team to develop guidelines to support country reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals, which were issued in early 2017.[9]

[8] The evaluation report of the previous project is available from www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-improving-the-collation-availability-and-dissemination-of-national-development-indicators-including-mdgs.

[9] Available from https://undg.org/document/guidelines-to-support-country-reporting-on-the-sustainable-development-goals/.

17. A comprehensive overview of the Statistics Division's activities on technical capacity-building, including those related to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal indicators, was provided to the Statistical Commission at its forty-eighth session in March 2017 in the report of the Secretary-General on statistical capacity-building (E/CN.3/2017/30). The report of the High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for Statistics for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (E/CN.3/2018/4) provides information about the overarching efforts for statistical capacity-building for monitoring the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in countries, such as activities related to the implementation of the Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data and the organization of the second United Nations World Data Forum, to be held in October 2018. The report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (E/CN.3/2018/2) provides information about its working groups, including the working group on statistical data and metadata exchange, which is developing a data structure definition and metadata structure definition for the Sustainable Development Goal indicators to facilitate data and metadata exchange and reporting.

V. Work programme of the inter-agency working group on the global Sustainable Development Goals review

18. Many international agencies and organizations contributed data and analysis to the Sustainable Development Goals progress reports and to the indicators database and metadata repository. In order to provide a working mechanism for the United Nations system to prepare the report, as mandated by the General Assembly in resolution 70/1, the Statistics Division has convened several teleconferences with the agencies that provide data and analysis for the preparation of the annual Sustainable Development Goals progress reports and the global database. It has been proposed that face-to-face meetings also be convened on a regular basis (at least once a year) to allow for an easier exchange and more in-depth technical discussion. The first face-to-face meeting was held on 1 and 2 March 2017, and the second is planned for the first quarter of 2018.

19. This inter-agency working group carries out the following activities:

(a) Reviews and discusses plans for the production of the annual progress report of the Secretary-General and the complementary, user-friendly annual Sustainable Development Goals report;

(b) Agrees on the structure, scope and coverage of the yearly reports and related contributions by the relevant organizations;

(c) Contributes to the regular update of the global indicators database, including by providing updates and refinements to the metadata, as needed;

(d) Exchanges information and updates on the capacity-development activities related to statistics and indicators for the 2030 Agenda;

(e) Reports annually to the Statistical Commission.

VI. Research exercise on a federated information system for the Sustainable Development Goals

20. In March 2017, a research exercise on a federated information system for the Sustainable Development Goals was launched by the Statistics Division, in partnership with Esri,[10] with the aim of exploring the feasibility of establishing a modern platform for collaboration among producers and users of statistical and geospatial data and information across national and global statistical systems. The exercise is based on the common vision of implementing the 2030 Agenda through effective access to and use of integrated statistical, geospatial and other sources of data, supported by technologies that facilitate interoperability, data sharing, visualization and dissemination, and collaboration across various data producers. Ireland, Mexico, the Philippines, Qatar, Senegal and South Africa participated in the initial phase of the exercise, and additional countries joined in October 2017.

21. The aim of the exercise is to pilot a federated system of national and global data hubs that enhance the capabilities of national statistical offices for data analysis, collaboration, communication and user engagement, leveraging geographic information systems as an integration framework. In particular, the implementation of country-led platforms that facilitate the integration of different data sources and collaboration among partners from different stakeholder groups, including donors and providers of geospatial and statistical information systems, is being explored to address Sustainable Development Goal reporting needs at all levels.

22. The concept of the project, together with applications in some of the countries that are part of the exercise, will be presented at a seminar before the forty-ninth session of the Statistical Commission, and a brief informal document summarizing the outcome of the discussion will be presented to the Commission, under agenda item 3 (a) "Items for discussion and decision: data and indicators for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". Based on the results obtained so far, the Statistics Division, in consultation with Member States that have already developed a national application and private sector partners and donors, is also developing a detailed proposal to implement a federated information system for the Sustainable Development Goals, including possible governance and financing mechanisms.

VII. Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training

23. The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals have generated demand from countries for statistical capacity-building, including training on areas related to the production and utilization of data and statistics for the monitoring of the Agenda. The Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data identifies statistical capacity-building as an essential action area for achieving the scope and intent of the 2030 Agenda and provides a framework for its planning and implementation. Extensive methodological work is in progress to meet the data requirements for new topics, and there is increased attention on administrative and non-traditional data sources. Such new sources and methods are likely to generate even greater demands for training from countries over the next few years.

24. There has been a long-felt need to harmonize the training offerings of various institutions and maximize their outreach to ensure that they are delivered in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. The sharing of training calendars, course materials and best practices by such institutions across regions is considered a good

[10] Esri is an international supplier of geographic information system software and web geographic information system and geodatabase management applications.

approach to maximize outreach and avoid duplication of efforts. Harmonization of the statistical courses and curricula and their compliance with internationally adopted statistical standards are crucial for enhancing the production of high-quality and comparable statistics in countries. The supply of training must be commensurate with the priorities and needs of countries. A recent online survey on training needs clearly showed a high demand for training in official statistics as well as in statistics from new and non-traditional sources.

25. In that context, the Statistics Division held a consultation with a wide range of stakeholders on the establishment of a network of international and regional institutions working on statistical capacity-building. At a meeting on statistical training held in Beijing from 13 to 15 September 2017, representatives of international and regional institutions engaged in statistical training and national statistical offices from several countries had overwhelmingly supported the establishment of a network to be known as the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training and proposed a road map towards its establishment and activities that the network would carry out in the next two years.

26. The network is currently being established, and several international and regional organizations have been invited to join as founding members, including the Statistics Division, which will function as the secretariat of the network. Statistical training institutions in member countries that offer courses to countries in their region or subregion will be invited to join the network in due course on the basis of specific criteria. An advisory group or other mechanism will ensure the representation of different stakeholders and will include national statistical offices with adequate regional representation.

27. It is proposed that a two-year workplan be developed by the founding member institutions and reviewed by the advisory group once the network has been established. The following are possible activities that may be carried out by the network:

(a) Sharing of the training curricula, calendars and materials offered by member institutions;

(b) In-depth assessment of training needs in countries, including in relation to the production, dissemination and use of data for the monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(c) Detailed mapping of courses offered by the various global and regional institutions;

(d) Mapping of training gaps, keeping in view the typology and core skill sets required;

(e) Establishment of work streams for the development of harmonized and standardized training curricula on a few selected topics (both traditional and new), which are modular in nature and in line with international concepts and guidelines;

(f) Finalization of globally recommended curricula on at least five key topics (by the end of the second year).

28. The goals, objectives, strategic action areas and governance and management of the network are presented in the annex to the present report. Detailed terms of reference for the network will be submitted to the Commission in a background document.

VIII. Conclusions

29. **The Commission is requested to:**

(a) **Take note of the present report presenting the Statistics Division's work to prepare the annual reports on the Sustainable Development Goals and update the global indicators database, its technical assistance activities in support of the indicator framework and its cooperation with the inter-agency working group on the global Sustainable Development Goals review;**

(b) **Express its views on the recommendations and guidelines for the basic requisites of national data platforms for follow-up and reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals, as detailed in the background document;**

(c) **Express its views on the research exercise on the piloting of a federated system of national and global data hubs;**

(d) **Express its views on the establishment of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training and the tentative governance and management arrangement, and comment on the proposed two-year workplan for the network.**

Annex

Goals, objectives, possible strategic action areas and tentative governance and management arrangements of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training

Goal

1. The goal of the Global Network of Institutions for Statistical Training is to build sustainable capacities in countries through the efficient, effective and harmonized delivery of training at the global and regional levels that will enable the production and use of high-quality data and statistics, including in the monitoring and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Objective

2. The overall objective of the network is to facilitate collaboration among its members in the delivery of training on statistics in a more harmonized and standardized manner and to improve the effectiveness of such training by maximizing its outreach.

Strategic actions areas

3. Once established, the network will carry out the following activities:

(a) Conduct a preliminary assessment to redefine country needs in the light of the new demands arising from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals;

(b) Assess training gaps with regard to the training needs of countries to systematically address them;

(c) Systematically share training courses, calendars and materials through a web-based platform;

(d) Harmonize statistical training courses and curricula in line with international guidelines and standards on concepts and methods;

(e) Build the capacities of existing statistical training centres to deliver training on official statistics based on harmonized and standardized training curricula;

(f) Promote training that enables data producers to improve data literacy and usage within stakeholder communities;

(g) Develop and nurture pools of trainers in all regions on different statistical areas and maintain a roster of experts that can be used by countries as and when required;

(h) Foster a global discussion on certification;

(i) Leverage capacity for the increased use of distance learning.

Governance and management

4. The network will be established with a few founding members selected in consultation with key international and regional statistical institutions and will later be expanded to include other members on the basis of specific criteria. The group of founding members is expected to be responsible for managing the operations of the network on a regular basis. One of the founding member institutions will be nominated by consensus to serve as the Chair, which is expected to be rotated every

two years. The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat will serve as the secretariat of the network.

5. An advisory group or other mechanism with representatives of selected national statistical offices and other data stakeholders will provide guidance on various matters, including the implementation of programme activities.

6. The group of founding members and the advisory group will work mainly through the exchange of emails and hold meetings at an agreed interval through teleconferencing or other electronic means. Physical meetings can be held on the sidelines of major meetings. The group of founding members will meet once a year in the margins of the annual session of the Statistical Commission.

7. The network will regularly report on the progress of its activities to the Statistical Commission.